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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 NAIROBI 000147

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SUBJECT: Somalia - Elections in Somaliland May Be Delayed

1. SUMMARY. Somaliland's presidential elections, currently planned for March 29, may be delayed for approximately two weeks. As agreed by all stakeholders, the Somaliland elections are to be held after the conclusion of a comprehensive voter registration process. The October suicide bombings in Hargeisa caused a delay in the voter registration process and it will not be completed before March 15. The one-month campaign period cannot begin until the voter registration list is accepted by all parties. Although the National Election Committee is professionally weak, and there have been some irregularities, all observers agree the highly sophisticated registration process, including facial recognition and fingerprints, has gone reasonably well. In a January 15 meeting with the Ambassador, opposition candidate Ahmed "Silanyo" Mohamed Mohamud said the process has been embraced by all Somaliland citizens, especially in the rural areas, and appealed for more engagement by the U.S. to ensure free, fair and transparent elections. End Summary.

Election Process Behind Schedule

2. (SBU) The Somaliland electoral process is proceeding relatively smoothly, but behind the original schedule due to the October 29 Hargeisa suicide bombings. The presidential elections are planned for March 29, but our NGO partners facilitating the process told us this date is likely to slip at least two weeks. If everything goes according to plans, the voter registration will be fully complete by March 15, vice mid-February as originally planned. The voter registration list must be accepted by all three parties before the one-month campaign period can begin. Our partners said that because of the pre-election activities that must occur under the law, there is no way the presidential elections can take place on March 29. Any delay beyond mid-April would require an act of parliament.

High Turnout for Registration Process  
But Some Irregularities

3. (SBU) While in general, all stakeholders agree that the voter registration process has been successful, impressive in terms of its scope and reach. Many held concerns about actually getting people out to register, yet the turnout has been tremendous. Opposition leader Ahmed Silanyo told the Ambassador that many, especially in the rural areas, were seeing their photograph for the first time. When their neighbors saw the voter registration/identification card, it demystified the process, and they too wanted to take part. The most significant difficulties have occurred in the disputed Sool and Sanaag regions where on January 4 two electoral officials and senior

military officer were killed.

¶4. (SBU) There have also been some irregularities in the process, with multiple registrations as the most common problem. With fingerprints and facial recognition software build into the registration, any duplicates should be eliminated once the electronic system validates the data. Some warn that since this is the first time a computerized process has been employed, the public may not be willing to trust the automated system.

¶5. (SBU) Our NGO partner Interpeace is working with the National Electoral Committee (NEC) to produce a code of conduct detailing agreed terms for handling non-fingerprinted registrants and the use of facial recognition software. The code is to be signed by all three parties and the NEC. A draft of the code of conduct has already been sent to the NEC for review and once it is signed, then preparations for compilation of the final voter list will get underway. All three parties must review and approve this final list before they launch their formal campaigns.

#### Weak National Electoral Committee Undermining Process

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¶6. (SBU) Interpeace expressed major disappointment with the work of the NEC. Interpeace told us that all of the seven members are generally incompetent and not able to address challenges in a professional manner. Their concerns are shared by the opposition parties and to some extent, the president. Many fear that if the elections are managed by the current NEC, it would be disastrous. The NEC has proved itself incapable of basic strategic planning and

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management, as demonstrated by the NEC's poor management of the voter registration process and the lack of any tangible preparations for the elections. All of our contacts in Somaliland told us that if it were left only to the NEC, neither the registration process nor the election preparations would have moved forward. In case of a close election, a dysfunctional NEC could make erratic decisions that could create serious problems.

¶7. (SBU) The key stakeholders agree that there needs to be a reconstituted NEC, comprised of competent members. (Note: The NEC is comprised of seven of members, representing each of Somaliland's three political parties. The opposition parties are willing to appoint new representatives to the NEC and Interpeace is confident that the government would agree to the same provided there was sufficient internal/external pressure. Interpeace told us that a new NEC can be constituted and the elections can still take place with only a 2-3 week delay. President Riyale's term expires on May 6, 2009 so elections must be held before April 6.

#### Opposition Leader Calls for Increased U.S. Engagement

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¶8. (SBU) On January 15, the Ambassador met with leading opposition candidate Ahmed "Silanyo" Mohamed Mohamud. (Note: Silanyo lost the 2003 presidential election by a very small margin. All agree that his concession of the election was a major achievement in Somaliland's democratic development.) Silanyo told us that there is great excitement about the upcoming elections, especially in rural areas. He said that Interpeace has been "excellent" and praised U.S. support for the organization. (Note: Interpeace has been a key facilitator of the voter registration process, going as far as to send a staff member to India with the hard drive containing all the voter registration information when a travel ban to Somaliland by the Indian government made it impossible for Indian technicians to fix some technical glitches with the system.) He also thanked the U.S. for supporting the political parties through programs with the International Republican Institute, yet noted that all party offices outside the capital remain weak. Silanyo noted that his Kulmiye party has a high level of involvement by women who are major drivers of the voter registration process.

¶9. (SBU) Silanyo asked the Ambassador to consider sending U.S.

Government officials to be part of the international observer mission to Somaliland to help ensure transparency in the process. Silanyo said that he believes his party has an excellent chance of winning the election because "The current regime has been tested and they have failed - people are not happy." Silanyo appealed for more visible U.S. support to the electoral process, using the media and other outlets to stress the importance of a free and fair presidential election. He told the Ambassador that the U.S. remains incredibly popular with the public and a strong message would make a great impact of the conduct of the elections. He acknowledged that smooth elections will be a cornerstone of Somaliland's case for recognition, which he said remains a top priority for all Somalilanders.

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RANNEBERGER